

Partition of Prisons & Women

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Partition of Punjab and Women

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Women constitute one half of the population of the world, and they play an important role in society. It will, therefore, be very significant to bring to focus the sufferings and sacrifices of women during the trauma of partition of Punjab in 1947.

The trouble for the non-Muslims in general, and for the women in particular, started in March 1947. Whatever may be the causes¹ of the Rawalpindi and Multan riots, it is admitted that these were of terrific nature. Lord Mountbatten, the last Viceroy of India, after visiting district Rawalpindi reported to the British Government in England, "The whole of the Hindu-Sikh part is an absolute wreck, as though it has been subjected to an air raid."² Several Hindu and Sikh villages were wiped out. Justice Teja Singh, a member of the Punjab Boundary Commission, stated before the Commission that during the Rawalpindi riots, "A large number of people were forcibly converted, children were kidnapped, and young women abducted and openly raped."³ Though a separate number of female casualties is not available, the official figure of deaths in the district of Rawalpindi was 2,263 which was considered far below the actual number.⁴ The women were subjected to maximum humiliation and torture. Their agony can be judged by the fact that a number of women jumped into wells to save their honour. It is as unbelievable today as it was at that time. But fortunately Pandit Jawsaharlal Nehru visited the village on 14th March, 1947, and he was told about the incidents of ladies jumping into wells. His staff photographer took photographs of the bottom of the well with the help of a flashlight. These photographs showed the decomposed limbs of the bodies. One copy of a photograph was given to me by late Sant Gulab Singh in whose haveli the well existed. He told me that his wife was the first to jump into the well. The photograph has been published in my book *Shahidian*.⁵

During the fateful months of August and September, 1947, the communal riots flared up on a very large scale in both the Punjabs. It

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is estimated by some British writers that about two lakhs were killed in the East and West Punjab.⁶ Thousands of women and children were abducted. The Governments of India and Pakistan who had recently taken over from the British, had no comprehension of the enormity of the situation. The people in general were infected with a spirit of vendetta, and took revenge by committing excesses on the womenfolk of the opposite community. Though Military Evacuee Organisation (M.E.O.) and Liaison Agencies had been established in both the Punjabs in September, 1947, nothing was done at Government level to alleviate the sufferings of the abducted women upto 6th December, 1947, when the following agreement was made between Governments of India and Pakistan regarding recovery of abducted women :

Agreement for Recovery of Abducted Women

The following decisions reached at the Conference between the Governments of India and Pakistan held on the 6th of December, 1947, are brought to the notice of all concerned for early compliance:

1. Every effort must be made to recover and restore abducted women and children within the shortest time possible.
2. Conversion by persons abducted after 1st March, 1947, will not be recognised, and all such persons must be restored to their respective Dominions. The wishes of the persons concerned are irrelevant. Consequently, no statements of such persons should be recorded before magistrates.
3. The primary responsibility for recovery of abducted persons will rest with the local police who must put full efforts in this matter. Good work done by Police Officers in this respect will be rewarded by promotion or grant of cash awards.
4. M.E.O.'s will render every assistance by providing guards in the transit camps and escort for the transport of recovered persons from transit camps to their respective Dominions.
5. Social workers will be associated with the scheme. They will look after camp arrangements and receive the abducted persons in their own Dominions. They will also collect full information regarding abducted persons to be recovered, and supply it to the Inspector General of Police and the local Supdt. of Police.
6. The District Liaison Officers (D.L.O.'s) will set up Transit Camps in consultation with the local Deputy Commissioners and public

workers, and supply information regarding abducted persons to be recovered.

7. Co-ordination betweendn different agencies working in the district will be secured by a Weekly Conference between the Supdt. of Police, the local M.E.O. Officer, the D.L.O. and the Deputy Commissioner. At this meeting, progress achieved will be reviewed, and every effort will be made to solve any difficulties experienced.⁷

The Chief Liaison Officer (C.L.O.) designated a D.L.O. in every district as District Recovery Officer. In this way, official machinery was established for recovery of abducted women in both the Punjuabs. In the East Punjab, Miss Mridula Sarabhai and Mrs. Bhag Mehta organised women workers for recovery work. Soon it was found that the local police was not helpful. The public in general was hostile to recovery work in both the provinces. This made recovery work difficult. At places, women workers appointed by Sarabhai and Mrs. Bhag Mehta did not see eye to eye with the District Recovery Officers. All these problems resulted in inordinate delay in the recovery work which caused growing misery to the afflicted women. The following proceedings of the Steering Committee held on March 10, 1948, indicate the inherent conflict between the East Punjab Liaison Agency and women workers led by Sarabhai :

“The Steering Committee requested the C.L.O. to cancel his instructions to the D.L.O.s that the women workers are not to go out alone in the districts. If a woman worker desired to go out alone, there should be no restriction on her movement. If, however, she wants the D.L.O. to accompany her, then it is a matter of mutual adjustment.” (Item No. 4)

“It was decided that all reports received by the C.L.O. from the D.L.O.s regarding the progress of work of recovery of abducted women will be put up to the Steering Committee. Similarly, all reports received by the provincial women workers from district women workers will also be put up to the Steering Committee.” (Item No. 5:1).

“Miss Sarabhai stated that her Regional Workers did not want the collaboration of the Regional Workers appointed by the C.L.O.: (Item No. 6)

“It was decided that all reports to be submitted by any member of this committee to the Govt. of India (Ministry of R&R and Mrs. Rameshwari Nehru) relating to the work of recovery of abducted

women in the West Punjab and NWFP, should be put up first to the Steering Committee which will consider them and forward them to the Govt. of India with its own recommendations.”⁸ (Item No. 8)

As indicated above, Mrs. Sarabhai did not co-operate with the District Recovery Officer. Similarly, the C.L.O. considered women workers’ job as useless. In his communication to the Chief Secretary, East Punjab Government, he wrote on 24th April, 1948 :

“Two women workers each are posted at Sheikhpura, Sargodha, Mianwali, Jhang, Lyallpur and Gujranwala. A third woman worker was taken by Mrs. Bhag Mehta when we went to Mianwali. She is for recovery work in Bhakkar Tehsil. As will be observed from what has been stated above, very little work is being done in connection with the recovery of abducted women and girls throughout the West Punjab. These women workers alongwith their transport are, therefore, being practically wasted.

“The matter was discussed today in a meeting of the Steering Committee in which Mrs. Punjabi, Mrs. Bhag Mehta and D. Surendra Nath, D.S.P. East Punjab were present. It was admitted that the women workers were at present unable to do any useful work, but it was decided to let them continue as it was hoped that things will improve with the additional East Punjab Police starting their activities in the districts.”⁹

It appears that in the beginning both the organisations did useful work. But the task was enormous, and their time limit was short. Both began to quarrel and shift responsibility on the other organisation. Ultimately, the entire responsibility was given to the East Punjab Liaison Agency which worked upto November, 1948. After that the work was transferred to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The decision to alleviate the sufferings of womenfolk, who had suffered the most during the partition of the Punjab was, however, indifferently acted upon. A very large volume of the correspondence between the high officials of the East Punjab and West Punjab indicates that the police officers in both the Punjabs acted partially in favour of their own community while recovering the abducted women. The Deputy High Commissioner for Pakistan wrote to the Chief Secretary, East Punjab : “One .. has written to say that his daughter... aged 13 years has been kept by one... son of ... Jat of village Bhoma, District Amritsar. In reply to his request for the recovery of the girl, he was informed by the Indian Military authorities (copy attached) that his daughter did not wish to leave her husband.”¹⁰ The D.L.O., Campbellpur, reported that the Deputy

Commissioners of Campbellpur and the Rawalpindi districts were not handing over the recovered abducted women and girls, because they had been handed over to the Azad Kashmir Government.¹¹ In some cases, the police officers in various districts had openly declared that it was their duty to see that proper regard was paid to public opinion. When recovered, the statements of the recovered women and girls were recorded and they were returned to their abductors by the District Authorities,¹² as it was said that they did not wish to leave their abductors.

On account of the fear of disturbance, the local authorities purposely avoided taking any action against the Pathans who had abducted the girls. Five non-Muslim girls were recovered by the Sub Inspector of Phularwan, District Shahpur. The girls were brought from Phularwan to Sargodha and handed over to the D.L.O. During the night, a large number of Pathans surrounded the house of the Inspector and on the following day they surrounded the officers of the Supdt. of Police and created a lot of commotion in the city. The Deputy Commissioner and Supdt. of Police prevailed upon the D.L.O. to hand over the girls to the Deputy Supdt. of Police. The Commissioner, Rawalpindi Division and Deputy Inspector General of Police reached Sargodha and with great difficulties the five girls were brought to India at dead of night.¹³

At places the police officers, who were appointed to protect the women, themselves committed the worst crime. Two Assistant Sub Inspectors of Police went to recover a non-Muslim woman from a village in the West Punjab and the unfortunate woman was raped and ravished by those very police officers during the nights on the way.¹⁴ In the meeting of the officers of the East Punjab Liaison Agency, it was brought to light that one Sub Inspector of Police at Kamoke (District Gujranwala) had collected all the non-Muslim girls at the time of the Kamoke train attack and distributed them to his accomplices.¹⁵

So far, there had been no special legislation for the recovery of abducted women. An ordinance called Abducted Persons Recovery and Restoration Ordinance was promulgated on January 31, 1949, and was subsequently replaced by the Abducted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Act 1949. One of the principal features of this Act was that it adopted a more comprehensive definition of the term "Abducted" than the one already provided in the Indian Penal Code.¹⁶ Another important aspect of this legislation was the provision for setting up of an Indo-Pak Tribunal to decide the disputed cases of abducted women. Camps for the stay of the recovered persons were to be established. This Act applied only to the 'affected areas', viz., U.P., East Punjab, Delhi, Patiala and East Punjab

States Union, and the United States of Rajasthan. A special provision was made to enable the recovery of abducted women from the other states in India. The co-ordinative officers and staff were appointed to assist the police in the recovery of the abducted persons. Social workers were also associated with this work.¹⁷ There was, however, no corresponding legislation regarding the abducted persons in Pakistan.

The Abducted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Act 1949 continued to be renewed every year upto 30th November 1957. By then, the abducted women began to show increasing reluctance to go to the other country after leaving their children. By the Indo-Pakistan Govt. decision of 1954, they could not be forced to go to the other country against their wishes. Secondly, the most serious consideration which prevented the Government of India from renewing the Abducted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Act of 1949 was the problem of the post-abduction children. During the period from January 1, 1954 to September 30, 1957 no fewer than 860 children were left behind by the Muslim women restored to Pakistan, whereas 410 children only went with them. These children created problems for the State which had to take care of them.¹⁸

The statements exchanged between the two Governments indicated that 25,856 and 9,366 person had been recovered in India and Pakistan, respectively.¹⁹ It is a significant fact that in both the countries a large majority of persons recovered were not those included in the lists of missing persons furnished by the respective Governments. No less than 4,415 abducted persons out of 30,335²⁰ were declared as "the non-abduction cases" by the Pakistan Government. The information regarding the abducted women supplied by the Indian Government could not be wrong as it was based on the data collected from the individuals concerned. About 4,191²¹ abducted persons, that is to say 13.8% of the list furnished by the Indian Government were reported by Pakistan Government to have died in Pakistan. This figure, too, does not appear to be correct as the corresponding number of the abducted women who died in India was surprisingly low, viz., 3.3%.²²

The most peculiar phenomenon with regard to the recovery work of non-Muslim women was that the non-Muslim abducted girls very often refused to be evacuated. They were too afraid of the rigidity of the caste system and were conscious of having lost their chastity. These very notions prevented them from facing their relatives. Though they were completely helpless under the circumstances, some of them really believed that their husbands and other relatives had failed to protect them, and hence they had lost all rights over them. Delay was yet another major factor impeding

their recoveries, because it gave their abductors the time and opportunity to din into their ears so many false and baseless rumours like "there is no food in the East Punjab", "near and dear ones had all been murdered", etc. In certain cases, the arguments of the abducted girls were very correct and genuine. One of them said to the D.L.O., Gujranwala, "How can I believe that your military strength of two sepoys could safely take me across to India when a hundred sepoys had failed to protect us and our people who were massacred." Another said, "I have lost my husband and have now gone in for another. You want me to go to India where I have got nobody and of course, you do not expect me to change husband everyday." A third said, "But why are you particular to take me to India? What is left in me now of religion or chastity?"²³

The troubles and tribulations of the Hindu and Sikh abducted women of occupied Kashmir, especially of district Muzaffargarh, had an altogether different tale of woe. Their recovery got complicated owing to the armed hostilities between India and Pakistan over the Kashmir issue. When the tribals attacked Kashmir, the Muzaffargarh area was the first to be occupied by them. The Hindus and Sikhs of the area were killed and a large number of women abducted. About 1,600 women and children were lodged in Amor Camp.²⁴ On account of hostilities with India, the Pakistan Government had banned the entry of Indian officials not only in Kashmir but also in the adjoining districts of West Punjab.²⁵ Consequently, all abductions of the West Punjab migrated to those districts to avoid detection. The non-Muslim women and children of Amor Camp could not be brought to India for four long years. It was reserved for Akali Chakkar Kaur Singh to recover them and bring them to India.

Akali Chakkar Kaur Singh (1892-1954 A.D.) belonged to Averha Chakkar, Tehsil Uri, District Muzaffarabad, Kashmir. He did not marry and devoted himself to missionary work of Sikh religion. During the tribal invasion of Kashmir, he lost 111 relatives including his aged mother. This stirred him into action. He went to Delhi and became guide of the first Indian army which landed at Srinagar to stem the tide of tribal invasion and remained there till cease-fire was declared. Later on, he devoted himself to the recovery of abducted women. In 1951, he met one Goodwill Mission from Pakistan, convinced them about the miserable conditions of women and children at Amor Camp and was also able to secure a promise of help.²⁶

Soon after Chakkar Kaur Singh reached Lahore, the Indian Government also encouraged him and introduced him to Pakistan officials as a great orator having knowledge of Islam and other religions. Two police inspec-

tors and eighteen police constables alongwith conveyance were given to him by the West Punjab Police Deptt. Wherever he went, hostile crowd gathered around him which was dispersed by his police escort.²⁷

Chakkar Kaur Singh had undertaken three recovery tours in Pakistan. Indian recovery officers in Lahore gave him very difficult cases like that of Amar Kaur. He pursued them with diligence and recovered the girls, details of which he has given in his diary.²⁸ But his most remarkable achievement was the recovery of 1,200 women and children from Amor Camp.

Sabar Hussain, the Commander of Amor Camp, had a personal grievance. His daughter Kulzam Akhtar had been left in Srinagar (Kashmir) in India. He had been trying his best to bring her to Pakistan, but not succeeded. Because of the Indo-Pakistan conflict in Kashmir, no Kashmiri Muslim could go to Pakistan or come to India. When Chakkar Kaur Singh contacted Sabar Hussain, he told him frankly that first his daughter should return before he could agree to the return of the Hindu and Sikh women and children in his camp.²⁹ This was a very difficult problem. But Chakkar Kaur Singh took it as a challenge. After coming to India, he worked for six months in Srinagar meeting political leaders like Sheikh Abdullah and Bakshi Ghulam Mohammed to request them to allow Kulzam Akhtar to go to Pakistan so that the Hindu and Sikh women of Amor Camp could be recovered. Ultimately, he was successful. He personally brought the Muslim girl from Srinagar to Jammu then to Jalandhar to secure her entry into Pakistan through Deputy High Commissioner, Pakistan.³⁰ In this way, 1,200 women and children were brought to India. Where the Government of India failed, a Sikh missionary succeeded in recovering abducted women.

Amid the recovery of abducted women and children, there were some very rare heartening episodes of noble deeds. Fateh Mohammed, a Muslim constable took a Sikh girl, 16 years old, whose parents had been murdered in the communal riots, to his house. While holding a copy of the holy Quran, he swore before his young daughters, wife and aged mother that he would treat the girl as his own daughter. He kept his vow and served the girl for a number of months. He made an earnest effort to locate her relations in East Punjab. Ultimately, he was able to find her brother who came to Lahore to take her, in the office of the C.L.O., East Punjab, and she gave a detailed statement as to how she was looked after by Fateh Mohammed. Her statement is preserved in East Punjab Liaison Agency Records No. LV-26-ES.

Similarly, S. Narain Singh of Bathinda area gaved shelter to a Muslim

girl of tender age whose parents had been murdered during the communal riots. He got her admitted in the school alongwith his granddaughters. When she came of age, he was able to locate one distant relative of hers through the Pakistan High Commissioner's Office. He also prepared dowry articles for her marriage. These, he gave her at the time of farewell on the Indo-Pak border. The episode was published in the New York Times, U.S.A. with the title Sweetest Revenge.

References

1. For causes vide my book *Shahidian*, Amritsar, 1964, pages 36-45. Also *Making of Pakistan*, Richard Symond, page 82
2. Viceroy's Personal Report No. 5, dated 1st May, 1947. Also introduction of my book *Select Documents on Partition of Punjab*, page 20
3. *Select Documents on Partition of Punjab*, page 352
4. *Ibid.*
5. This book was compiled by me at the instance of late Bhai Vir Singh. It was published by Chief Khalsa Diwan, Amritsar in 1964.
6. For details of casualties vide my book, *Partition of Punjab*, Patiala, 1989, pages 130-132.
7. PRCF 119-ER-49, page 2, Document No. 197, *Select Documents of Partition of Punjab*, pages 572-573.
8. *Select Documents on Partition of Punjab*, page 583, Document No. 204.
9. *Ibid.*, Document No. 219.
10. P.B.R. Letter No. D.H.C., 115/47 dated 11.3.'48, File No. C.F. 321-ER-48.
11. L.A.R.D.O. No. 8312/CLA dated 23.1.1948, File No. LXVIII/5.
12. *Ibid.*
13. L.A.R. Proceedings of meeting of officers, File No. L-VIII/14/171 (PT-11).
14. P.B.R. File No. C.F. 463-ER-49.
15. L.A.R. File No. L-VIII/14/171 (Pt. II), similar statement regarding this Sub-Inspector at Kamoke has also been given in the P.B.R.
16. According to Clause No. 2 of the Abducted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Act 1949, "abducted person" means a male child under the age of sixteen years, or a female of whatever age, who is, or immediately before the 1st day of March, 1947, was a Muslim and who on or after that day and before 1st January, 1949, has become separated from his or her family and is found to be living with or under the control of any other individual or family, in the latter case includes a child born to any such female after the said date.
17. Abudcted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Act 1949.
18. Recovery and Restoration of Abducted Persons in India and Pakistan, Government of India, Publications, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, page 7.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
20. *Idem.*
21. *Idem.*
22. *Idem.*
23. L.A.R. File No. LIX/3-D.L.O., Gujranwala's Report.
24. *Akali Chakkar Kaur Singh de Pakistan de Safar*, edited by Kirpal Singh, Khalsa Samachar, Amritsar, p. 1959, pages 26, 63.
25. *Partition of Punjab*, Kirpal Singh, 2nd edition, Pages, 172-173.
26. *Akali Chakkar Kaur Singh de Pakistan de Safar*, p. 13.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
28. *Ibid.*, pp. 47-48, 53-57.
29. *Ibid.*, page 66.
30. *Ibid.*, pages 67-68.

CONDUCT

The integrity of men is to be measured by their conduct, not by their professions.

— Junius

SERVICE

They serve God well, who serve His creatures.

— Caroline Norton

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1. The first step in the process is to identify the problem or issue that needs to be addressed. This involves gathering information and understanding the context of the problem.

4. The Commission is of the opinion that the proposed changes to the rules of the Commission are in the public interest and should be adopted.

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